

Personal and Academic Writing: Revisiting the Debate

Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk

ABSTRACT: More than ten years have passed since the widely publicized debate about personal and academic writing that played out in the 1990s between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. But the question of the relative merits of these two different types of writing for student writers continues to be an issue of concern for teachers of composition, especially teachers of basic writing. In this article, I take another look at this important question. Using the psycho-linguistic theories of Jerome Bruner and James Britton as the basis for analysis, I reconsider the Elbow-Bartholomae debate. Then, using data from a qualitative study of reflective journal writing I conducted, I argue that all students—and especially basic writers—need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse.

KEYWORDS: personal writing, academic writing, expressive language, reflective journal writing

More than ten years have passed since the widely publicized debate about personal and academic writing that played out in the 1990s between Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. But the question of the relative merits of these two different types of writing for student writers continues to be an issue of concern for teachers of composition, especially teachers of basic writing.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is still not widespread agreement about the most appropriate type of writing to assign in composition courses. In a 2005 article reviewing the changes and trends in composition since 1990, Richard Fulkerson makes it clear that both personal and academic writing continue to have strong adherents among faculty teaching composition. Fulkerson identifies “expressivism,” which is closely connected with Elbow’s concept of personal writing, as “the enduring category which seems to be going strong, despite the groundswell of cultural critical pedagogies” (666). Bartholomae’s views, according to Fulkerson, are reflected as a subset of “rhetorical approaches,” which emphasize helping students to acquire academic discourse. In May 2006, years after the process movement, with which Elbow was closely associated, had

Rebecca Williams Mlynarczyk is Professor of English and Director of the ESL Program at Kingsborough Community College, CUNY. She is co-editor of the *Journal of Basic Writing*.

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been dismissed by some as passé (see, for example, Thomas Kent’s edited collection *Post-Process Theory: Beyond the Writing-Process Paradigm*), Robert Yagelski validates Elbow’s approach as “especially compelling in our time of educational conformity and intellectual rigidity” (539). According to Yagelski, Elbow’s ideas, along with those of Donald Murray and Paulo Freire, may actually seem “radical” rather than outmoded to teachers working in the current climate of mandatory testing and educational standards. Thus, long after it seemed that Bartholomae, with his emphasis on academic writing, had “won” the debate, teachers are still facing the question Elbow and Bartholomae considered in the 1990s: What types of writing (and reading) to assign in the first-year composition or basic writing course?

In this article, I will take another look at this perennial question. First, I will address the problem of defining “personal” and “academic” writing by referring to several psycholinguistic theories that help to shed light on these terms. Then, using these theories as the basis for analysis, I will reconsider the Elbow-Bartholomae debate. Finally, using data from a qualitative study I conducted, I will illustrate my own perspective on this question. Over the past decade, I have increasingly come to realize the importance of going beyond personal writing to help basic writers to acquire academic discourse, to read and to write intelligently about their reading. At the same time, I have also come to believe that all students—and especially basic writers—need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse. Students first need to explore ideas encountered in academic work in language (whether spoken or written) that feels comfortable, not strained, in order to work toward the goal of being able to write convincingly about these ideas in more formal language.

Background and Definition of Terms

What do we actually mean when we speak of “personal” and “academic” writing? Although the forms are often blended or overlapping in college writing, most composition teachers would agree that there is a fundamental difference between a personal account of living through one’s parents’ divorce and an academic essay arguing to end the system of no-fault divorce in the United States.

In attempting to understand what is meant by personal and academic writing, I have found it useful to refer to several scholars whose work I drew upon in an article published in 1991 (“Is There a Difference”). One of these is the psychologist and educator Jerome Bruner. Bruner’s 1986 essay col-

lection, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, begins with an epigraph taken from William James that sheds light on the difference between personal and academic writing: “To say that all human thinking is essentially of two kinds—reasoning on the one hand, and narrative, descriptive, contemplative thinking on the other—is to say only what every reader’s experience will corroborate” (qtd. in Bruner xiii). Bruner, like James, categorizes all cognitive functioning into two distinct modes, which “(though complementary) are irreducible to one another” (11). He refers to these differing forms of thought as the “narrative mode” and the “paradigmatic (or logico-scientific) mode.” According to Bruner, the two modes differ in several respects: The goal of the narrative mode is to be evocative, to convince by being true to life, to achieve verisimilitude. The goal of the logico-scientific mode, in contrast, is empirical truth or verifiability; this mode strives to convince by using procedures for formal and empirical truth. The narrative mode takes delight in the particular whereas the logico-scientific mode seeks to transcend the particular in order to make valid generalizations. The narrative mode often takes the form of stories whereas the logico-scientific mode takes the form of arguments (11-43).

Another scholar, the linguist and educator James Britton, drew on the work of the linguist Edward Sapir, in developing his theory of language use. Sapir, like Bruner, classified all language into “two distinct orders” (11, qtd. in Britton 166): “expressive language,” exemplified by everyday speech; and “referential language,” exemplified by scientific discourse. Although Sapir saw the categories as distinct, he acknowledged that they are “intertwined, in enormously complex patterns” (11, qtd. in Britton 166). Britton expanded this view of language to include a third category, which he characterized as “poetic language” (169). Furthermore, unlike Bruner and Sapir, who classified language into separate and distinct modes, Britton represented the varieties of language use along a continuum (174).

The “expressive language” of ordinary speech—language that is most private and closest to the self—appears in the center of Britton’s continuum. As language becomes more public, it moves outward in one of two different directions. Moving in one direction, speakers and writers produce “transactional language,” the language of scientific reports; with this type of language the goal is to convey meaning in explicit ways. But as speakers and writers move away from expressive language in the other direction, they produce “poetic language,” the language of stories, novels, and poems; rather than seeking to be explicit, poetic language usually conveys its meaning implicitly (166-80).

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The three theories of language use—Bruner’s, Sapir’s, and Britton’s—resonate and overlap with one another in interesting ways as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Juxtaposition of Three Theories of Language

Bruner		
Narrative	Paradigmatic (or Logico-Scientific)	
Goals: to be evocative, to convince by lifelikeness or verisimilitude		Goals: empirical truth, to convince with formal and empirical proof
Delights in the particular		Seeks to transcend the particular
Example: story		Example: argument

Sapir		
Expressive Language	Referential Language	
	Example: everyday speech	Example: scientific discourse

Britton		
Poetic Language	Expressive Language	Transactional Language
More public	Most private	More public
Meaning is implicit	Close to the self	Meaning is explicit
Example: story or poem	Example: everyday speech (and earliest forms of written language)	Example: scientific report

Although the terms used in Table 1 are generally not the ones used in the composition literature (with the notable exceptions of Bruner’s “narrative” and Britton’s “expressive” language), these linguistic terms can be helpful in discussing the differences between personal and academic writing. Clearly, academic writing, which strives to convince through logic and hopes

to arrive at supportable generalizations, is more closely allied with Bruner's logico-scientific mode, Sapir's referential language, or Britton's transactional language. Personal writing is closer to Bruner's narrative mode or to Britton's expressive mode, which is private and close to the self. More polished (and more public) forms of personal writing fall into Britton's poetic mode.

Bruner's theory is descriptive in that he looks at finished products—novels or scientific papers—rather than focusing on the thought processes that resulted in those products. He does, however, hint at a more basic level of thought when he states that each of his two modes could be a “transformation of simple exposition, by which statements of fact are converted into statements implying causality. But the types of causality implied in the two modes are palpably different” (11). Perhaps this “simple exposition” is akin to Britton's expressive language. However, Bruner does not go on to clarify this concept or to explore how the possible “transformation” could take place—and specifically how teachers might help it to take place. Britton, whose research is often rooted in the classroom, does address this question in greater depth. I will return to Britton's ideas on this subject later.

Personal and Academic Writing: Perspectives from Composition

The two scholars whose names are most closely identified with the discussion of the merits of emphasizing “personal” or “academic” writing in first-year composition or basic writing courses are Peter Elbow and David Bartholomae. Their public conversations took place at the 1989 and 1991 meetings of CCCC (Conference on College Composition and Communication), and their remarks were reproduced and further developed in the February 1995 issue of *College Composition and Communication*. Much has happened in the field of composition since the publication of this widely read conversation. And Elbow's and Bartholomae's views on this question have undoubtedly changed and evolved in the years since the debate was published. Nevertheless, this well-publicized conversation remains a kind of defining moment in composition studies, often referred to in journal articles, conversations among colleagues, and on Internet discussion boards and composition websites.

Thus, it seems appropriate at this time to take another look at the positions Elbow and Bartholomae staked out in their 1995 debate. Interestingly, although this exchange has often been characterized as a debate over the merits of personal versus academic writing, Elbow never uses the term “personal writing,” preferring the more generic term “writing.” In “Being a

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Writer vs. Being an Academic,” Elbow describes his priorities in designing a composition course for first-year students. He explains his decision to place the students’ own writing “at the center” (75) of his course, devoting more time and attention to writing than to reading and using student writing as the key text via a class magazine. He justifies this decision by explaining that “virtually every other course privileges reading over writing—treats input as central and output as serving input” (75). As a writing teacher, Elbow sees one of his main goals as “understanding” student texts. He assumes that his students have important ideas to express, and he encourages them to express their meanings more completely in subsequent drafts. In contrast with teachers of academic writing, who (according to Elbow) teach students to “distrust language,” he wants his students to “trust language” or at least “to hold off distrust till they revise” (78). In general, Elbow does not encourage his students to see their writing as part of a larger discourse. Instead, he invites them “to pretend that no authorities have ever written about their subject before” (79). He encourages them “to write as though they are a central speaker at the center of the universe” (80). Finally, Elbow tries to set up writing situations in which the student/writer knows more about the subject than does the teacher/reader. He sees this as crucial if we want to keep students from equating writing with “being tested” (81). Elbow ends with a plea addressed to his own audience: “If academics were more like writers—wrote more, turned to writing more, enjoyed writing more—I think the academic world would be better” (82). He acknowledges that some of the ideas expressed in this essay may seem “romantic” (82), but he maintains his allegiance to “writing” as the proper goal of the first-year composition course.

In “Writing with Teachers: A Conversation with Peter Elbow,” Bartholomae assumes a very different stance. He argues that “there is no writing done in the academy that is not academic writing” (63). For Bartholomae, all instruction is influenced by the social context in which it takes place, and he wants students to become aware of the dynamics of college classrooms, where teachers have more power than students and where students’ texts are “defined by all the writing that has preceded them, writing the academy insistently draws together: in the library, in the reading list, in the curriculum” (64). Rather than viewing the teacher as a “frontier guide” in the “open” space of the classroom (64-65), Bartholomae sees teachers as managers, “people who manage substations in the cultural network, small shops in the general production of readers and writers” (66). In Bartholomae’s courses, students read key texts and write critically about their reading. In

the process, they practice the academic “skills” of paraphrasing, quoting, and citing sources. In contrast with Elbow, who wants students to trust their own language, Bartholomae encourages students to recognize and push against the cultural commonplaces that sometimes pre-determine how and what they write. In concluding, Bartholomae asks some difficult questions about the choices he faces in designing a writing course and justifies his ultimate decision to reject what he refers to as “sentimental realism” (69-71). Instead, he feels that composition “should be part of the general critique of traditional humanism” (71). He ends by stating that he “would rather teach or preside over a critical writing, one where the critique is worked out in practice, and for lack of better terms I would call that writing ‘academic writing’” (71).

In assessing this dialogue, it is important to point out that the written and face-to-face debates between Elbow and Bartholomae were collegial. The two men clearly respect each other. But a close reading of the written exchange reveals that their values as composition instructors differ dramatically. Some of the salient differences between Elbow’s and Bartholomae’s views, as set out in their published conversation of 1995, are highlighted in Table 2.

Table 2. Areas of Difference

	Elbow	Bartholomae
Writing	Privileges [personal] writing	Privileges academic writing
Reading	Uses the students’ own writing as the key text (class magazine)	Emphasizes critical reading of key texts
Students	Sees students as individuals	Sees students within a social context
Teachers	Sees teacher as “coach,” not “test evaluator” (Elbow’s metaphors)	Sees teacher as “manager,” not “frontier guide” (Bartholomae’s metaphors)
	Feels teacher should get students to “trust language” (be comfortable)	Feels teacher should get students to “distrust language” (be critical)
	Feels teacher should encourage students’ “credulity”	Feels teacher should encourage students’ “skepticism”

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Elbow draws attention to these differences at the beginning of his essay:

I don't mind high or distant goals. But I'm troubled by a sense that they conflict with each other—that progress toward one [academic writing] could undermine progress toward the other [writing]. A distant mountain is a good guide for walking—even if I know I won't get to the top. But I feel as though I am trying to walk toward two different mountains. ("Being" 73)

Elbow's metaphor here connects in an intriguing way with Britton's continuum of language use (see Table 1). The student is standing in the center, working from the comfort zone of expressive language. Based on the positions Elbow and Bartholomae staked out in the 1990s, they *would* have students walk in different directions along this continuum. Elbow would like them to move toward Britton's poetic language, to write well-told stories, effective narratives, drawing on their own experiences, developing their own "voices," finding power within their "own" ideas. On the other hand, Bartholomae would have the students move toward Britton's transactional language, constructing sound arguments based on culturally significant texts, acquiring power as they move closer to the language of their instructors, the language of the academy.

In their debate neither scholar made an explicit connection with the role of expressive language in helping students move toward either end of Britton's language continuum. It seems significant, though, that at the end of his response to Bartholomae, Elbow brings in the idea of freewriting, which he had done so much to promote in the 1970s (*Writing*), as a way to be both "real" and "utopian" in the composition classroom (89). In just ten minutes of classroom time, Elbow explains:

Students discover that they can write words and thoughts and not worry about what good writing is or what the teacher wants, they discover that their heads are full of language and ideas (and sometimes language and ideas they had no idea were there), and they discover they can get pleasure from writing. (89)

In this essay, Elbow does not go on to explore how freewriting, which clearly is a written form of Britton's expressive language, can be used to help students move toward either of the two mountains he sees looming

in the distance.¹ Britton, however, does emphasize this connection when he writes:

Expressive language provides an essential starting point because it is language close to the self of the writer: and progress towards the transactional should be gradual enough to ensure that “the self” is not lost on the way: that on arrival “the self”, though hidden, is still there. It is the self that provides the unseen point from which all is viewed: there can be no other way of writing quite impersonally and yet with coherence and vitality. (179)

I agree with Britton on this point. If students—especially basic writing students—are to acquire academic language in a meaningful, powerful way, the emphasis on exploring ideas in personal, expressive language cannot be neglected. Clearly, Elbow was more attuned to these values than was Bartholomae. However, while rereading the conversation between Elbow and Bartholomae from the perspective of 2006, I am struck by how much closer the entire field of composition has moved to Bartholomae’s position, which emphasizes the socially constructed nature of writers, students, and classrooms, and stresses the importance of critical reading in the writing class.²

By stating his position so strongly, however, Bartholomae has left himself open to critique. In his widely read article “Inventing the University,” first published in 1985, Bartholomae states that students, and in particular the basic writers he works with at the University of Pittsburgh, “have to invent the university by assembling and mimicking its language, finding some compromise between idiosyncrasy, a personal history, and the requirements of convention, the history of a discipline. They must learn to speak our language” (443). Bartholomae’s defense of this position is nuanced, and he acknowledges how difficult the process will be for basic writers: “The writer must get inside of a discourse he can only partly imagine” (454). While recognizing the difficulty of the task, Bartholomae insists that it must be done:

The movement toward a more specialized discourse begins (or perhaps, best begins) when a student can both define a position of privilege, a position that sets him against a “common” discourse, and when he can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the “common” code but his own. (453)

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In order to succeed at academic writing, according to Bartholomae, basic writers must work at appropriating their professors' discourse while relinquishing their own

Richard Boyd, among others, has criticized this stance. In his critique, he focuses on "the problems engendered by Bartholomae's endorsement of a mimetic relationship between student and teacher." As Boyd explains:

And it is with the way that the mimetic situation necessarily entails the message that the subject must put off and ultimately despise the "naïve, outsider" language he or she brings to the university that the emulation theory of teaching becomes especially problematic, especially if it occurs in the culturally diverse classroom. If we establish the teacher as the model member of a discourse community who must be mimicked by all students, are we not setting up a situation that specifically encourages students to reject whatever cultural past and distinctiveness they may have that makes them "outsiders" to our world?

I doubt whether Bartholomae would answer this question with an unqualified "yes." However, he does not adequately address this issue in developing his approach to promoting academic discourse among basic writers.

Despite the undisputed significance of Bartholomae's work,³ I, like Boyd, differ with his views on how to help students acquire academic discourse. It does not seem feasible that the students I teach, basic and ESL writers in a CUNY community college, will really be able to "invent the university" without using the primary resource they bring with them to college—their own expressive language, language that is private, not public, language that is close to the self, to use Britton's terminology. For this reason, I ask the students in my classes to write about their reading first in informal reading response journals. Students need to reflect on their reading using personal, expressive language in order to acquire genuine academic discourse and not just a pale imitation of their professors' language. This does not mean, however, as Elbow argued, that the main text in the first-year writing class should be the students' own writing. Students need to learn to write about other texts, but they come to do this most powerfully when they first explore ideas, often connecting with these ideas in a personal way, by writing about them in expressive language before being asked to write more traditional academic essays.

The Role of Expressive/Personal Writing in the Acquisition of Academic Discourse

To illustrate this point I will draw upon examples from one of the students who participated in a qualitative study I conducted on the journal writing of multilingual students (Mlynarczyk *Conversations*). Because my research focused on journal writing rather than essays, I have not previously analyzed the data in terms of how students acquire academic discourse. But in reviewing the Elbow-Bartholomae debates, I was reminded of the experiences of Roberto, one of five writers in my study (all student participants are referred to by pseudonyms). Roberto was born in Colombia and immigrated to the United States with his family at the age of thirteen. He attended and graduated from a public high school, where he was initially placed in the lowest level of ESL. At the time of the study, he was eighteen years old and was a college freshman enrolled in an ESL writing course I taught in a four-year college. He had been placed in this developmental course because he had failed the university's test of minimum competence in writing. During the semester, I asked students to keep an open-ended journal in which they would write about themselves as readers and writers. I encouraged them to write regularly and required that they write at least five pages a week. I collected the journals every two or three weeks and wrote letters of response—individual letters at first and later group letters to the whole class.

From the beginning of the semester, Roberto's journal writing demonstrated the development that can occur when students use expressive language to write about their reading, writing, and course material in language that is comfortable and close to the self. The following is an excerpt from Roberto's first journal entry, which was written in class:

I've been writing for three year in English. I know for a fact now that you can use writing as your best friend. Writing how you feel can make you realize many things. You can develop a lot of knowledge and open mind thinking. No one will listen to you as a notebook can. No one will listen [to] your thoughts about politics, problems, love, faith as a good diary can. A piece of paper never lets you down.
(qtd. in Mlynarczyk *Conversations* 55)

Roberto's journal that semester, all sixty-five pages of it, epitomized what I hoped students would get from this "extra" writing assignment. It's important to point out that not all of the students in the two ESL writing

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classes I taught that spring were as convinced of the value of journal writing as Roberto was. But many students in my classes that semester and in the years since then have used their journals in similarly productive and creative ways.

One advantage that Roberto had over most of his classmates was that he had been convinced of the value of journal writing during his high school years, when one of his English teachers encouraged the students to keep a journal. Roberto explained to me during the interviews that in high school he was made to feel “uncool” by the other students because of the way he spoke and the way he dressed. So he concentrated on his schoolwork to prove what he could do. By the time he reached his last semester, he was placed in the advanced English class. But even there, he explained during an interview, the students were afraid to honestly discuss their reactions to the books they were reading. They were afraid “if they say something, they will be looked as uncool or stupid or something,” so “you just kept it to yourself” (69). As the only immigrant in this advanced English class, Roberto felt vulnerable and explained his reaction, “I found myself being very quiet in that class, not talking to anyone, while they would just be cursing everywhere, like doing their thing” (69-70).

Today we often talk about the socially constructed nature of classrooms and the importance of helping our students join “the academic community.” Based on what Roberto told me in the interviews, it was clear that in high school, he did not feel part of a community of peers, something he revealed by the way he always referred to his high school classmates in the third person, as “they” rather than using the first person, “we.” Instead of identifying with his classmates, he directed his energy into the writing he did for the advanced English course and was gratified by the teacher’s positive reaction. He explained during the interviews: “She thought I did the best, that lady. . . . She used to tell me, like, ‘I don’t believe it. You know, you don’t speak in class, and you come out with this writing’” (68).

Given this past history, it’s not surprising that Roberto welcomed my journal assignment. For the first six and a half weeks of the course, he wrote only about his responses to the book we were reading, *A Place for Us*, a memoir written by Nicholas Gage, a Greek immigrant. The following entry is typical of the forty-four pages of Roberto’s journal that were devoted to this book:

Chapter nine brought me old memories of my early years. How nice it was to be with boys of the same condition and talking in the same manner. Being wild. This was an unforgettable part of life. Playing

the innocent but being the bad boys in the street. Trying hard to be the gangsters of the moment. Risking your bones just so a girl can pay attention to you. I think we all get to a point where you feel ready to be self sufficient or, put in another way, uncontrollable. This is where the old conflict starts. Your old folks trying to keep you out of trouble don't get nothing but hostile looks. You feel like the street corrupted boys are your family and your own family is the opresor. . . . You don't realize they are the bad guys until something puts a stop. For Nick [the author of the memoir], it was that beating that he got in his old neighborhood. For me it was my family (my father's side). (57)

Thinking back to the linguistic theories discussed earlier, this excerpt is clearly an example of Britton's expressive language. Written in the first person, this is language that is close to the self and influenced by the rhythms of everyday speech. Usually in his entries about the book, Roberto empathized with the narrator, Nick, comparing their experiences and looking for life lessons that he could draw out of his reading. A natural question that arises then is whether this was just a special book for Roberto because it so closely mirrored his own experiences. Would he have been motivated to write in expressive language about reading that was more distant from his world and his personal concerns? In his case, the answer is a definite "yes." After the class had finished reading *A Place for Us* and begun preparations for the University's writing exam, Roberto began to write reflectively about a classics course he was taking that semester. One entry began with Roberto speculating about "the pagan Gods and how this stories became part of the Greek culture which later influenced our world greatly." The entry continued:

I wonder what I'd be like being under the existence of this gods, all they do is fool around with mortals. It'd be wonderfull to make a sacrifice to Cupid or Aphrodite so she could make the girl of my dreams fall in love with me. How nice it'd be to ride Helius' chariot and see everything from far away. . . . How different my house would be if Hestia (God of hearth) lived there. I bet my parents would let me go everywhere I want at night. (79-80)

No matter how far academic material was from his own experience, Roberto seemed to have no trouble using expressive writing to speculate and make connections.

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By the end of the semester, Roberto had re-gained confidence in his abilities as a writer, which had been shaken by failing the University's placement exam. Although my study was focused on the students' journals, not their essays, Roberto did well on all the assigned essays and passed the writing assessment test—a requirement for passing the course. By the time I interviewed the students during the summer session, Roberto's one developmental course had been completed, and he was enrolled in summer school. In the interviews we talked a lot about the philosophy course he was taking at the time. Writing was an important part of this course, and Roberto received an A on his first paper. Secure in his own ability to think, an ability that he had nurtured in his previous education by writing freely in the expressive mode, Roberto was not bothered by his philosophy professor's injunction to keep his own opinions out of his essays. He explained to me in an interview, ". . . there is not much time to spend [referring to his philosophy course, where the professor felt the need to cover a lot of material]. . . . So what I did is, I did my best in studying those theories. I did my best on knowing them, and then on my own I can think" (82). Although Roberto wasn't asked to write a journal for the philosophy course, he was in fact keeping an ongoing reflective journal in his head. As he explained it:

I took the class as something interesting to know, how these people used to think and how they came out with explanations for things that we still ask ourselves. But I have my beliefs. You know, I believe in God. I believe a lot of things. And it would be really hard to get me out of those things. (81)

Here Roberto shows how he continues to process ideas mentally in his own terms while at the same time remembering his professor's straightforward advice to the whole class: "“This course is not about your opinion”" (81).

Roberto thrived in this philosophy course and respected the professor. He was an example, perhaps a rare one, of a student who made a seamless transition from the developmental writing classroom to the academic mainstream. As I analyzed the interview transcripts, I noticed a change in the way Roberto spoke about his learning, which seemed significant to me. When he talked about his high school or even my own ESL writing course, he described himself as a "loner," someone who held back, who didn't want to expose himself or his ideas in the public space of the classroom. Without exception, he referred to his classmates as "they," "the others." He spoke about the summer philosophy course in a very different way:

It was great; I mean this class was great. We started with Plato. We all sympathized with Plato. Then we moved to Descartes, and we were surprised by his thoughts. He denied matter. It's like, "How do I know that I'm not dreaming right now?" . . . And we all, we didn't actually sympathize with him. We just said, "He could be right, but I don't like it." And then we moved to Hume, and we were surprised also. Like this is true. But how can he not have God? Cause most of us believed in God. And most of us were thinking the same thing. I know I was. It was like, "He's right." He gave us an excellent study on the naturalistic view of morality. . . . but how can he not have God around? And then at the end with Immanuel Kant, we all sympathized, "Yeah, he's the mind of reason that discovers that there is always a universal truth about morals that we have to follow." . . . So I guess they all have a good point. You just sympathize with all of them. (82)

It's exciting to me, as someone who cares about developmental education, to observe Roberto's development as a writer, a thinker, and a college student. He has acquired academic discourse, the language of philosophy. This last interview excerpt also shows a change in how Roberto sees himself in the classroom: the other students are no longer "they," the ones who curse and think of him as "uncool." In this class, the other students are "we," and Roberto clearly sees himself as part of the group. I believe that, at this point, Roberto has succeeded in achieving the goal advocated by Bartholomae. He has invented a university in which he is free to speak and write. He sees himself as part of an academic discourse community. However, he has accomplished this change not by memorizing theories and spouting them back in imitation of his teachers' language, but rather by exploring ideas from his courses using Britton's (and Elbow's) expressive language—whether in the form of journal writing, discussions with peers, or dialogues in his own mind.

Some Caveats and a Conclusion

I do not wish to argue that expressive journal writing is a panacea, that it will automatically transform basic writers into comfortable and creative writers in the realm of academic discourse. Even in my own study, this did not occur. All five of the students I interviewed passed the University's test of "minimum competence in writing" at the end of the course, but only

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three of them had what they and I would characterize as positive and/or “transformative” experiences sparked by the reading/writing journals. Even these numbers—three out of five—are misleading. My study was qualitative and small in scale, intended to provide “thick description” of the students’ differing experiences with the journals rather than evidence for a generalization about the efficacy of journal writing for basic and ESL writers.

We can, however, learn much from considering the detailed portraits of student writers that emerge from qualitative studies such as the one I conducted. In Roberto’s case, for example, there were many factors that helped him to make the most of the expressive journal writing assignment: his own interest in reading and writing, his positive experiences in his most recent high school English class, and his ability to connect in a personal way with academic material. For other students in the study, the journal writing was less productive. Maribel, for example, was similar to Roberto in being a native speaker of Spanish (she was from the Dominican Republic), having lived in the United States about the same amount of time, and having attended high school here. But her journal writing seemed forced and unreflective, just a response to a school assignment, not an exploration of ideas using personally felt, expressive language. It was only toward the end of the semester, when in frustration I urged Maribel to use the journal to write about what she really believed, that she began to write entries that I judged to be reflective and personally meaningful.

Kiyoko, an international student from Japan, was quite a different story. I loved reading her journal, which I felt was poetic and highly reflective. I did not learn until the interviews after the semester ended that this required journal writing had made her extremely uncomfortable. She did not enjoy the process of freewriting that I had recommended for the journal since she felt she could not reread and correct her writing. In my analysis after the interviews were completed, I concluded that the unrevised journal writing had made Kiyoko feel a deep sense of shame—an observation that was supported by the fact that she threw her journal away before the second interview even though she knew it was an important data source for my study.

Another caveat relates not to the student participants but rather to some of Britton’s terms which I used in analyzing the data. According to Britton, expressive language is “private” as opposed to the “public” language of academic writing; in its relationship to everyday speech, it is language that is close to the “self.” Notions of private and public, of a discrete “self” have been called into question by more recent theories emphasizing the socially

constructed nature of language and identity.

In my own analysis of the students' journal entries and interviews, I have had to acknowledge that the journals, which I originally had considered to be "private" and close to the "self," were in fact "public" documents, not written only for self-expression but in fact a required writing assignment turned in to—and read by—a teacher. Ironically, Maribel, Kiyoko, and Lan, another student participant, were more aware of this than I was.

Throughout the semester, Maribel had written journals that were largely summaries of her reading, and I had been stymied in my attempts to encourage her to be "more reflective." In an entry she selected as the most important one in the entire journal, she explained that reflecting on her reading in a personal way violated her sense of family privacy. Responding to a passage in Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger of Memory*, she agrees with Rodriguez's mother, who felt he should never have written about the "private" aspects of his family's life in the "public" space of his autobiography: "I think that Richard's mother has all the right to tell Richard not to reveal the things that happened to the family. . . . I'm always saying that something that happened to a family, nobody has to know it. Because is not their problem" (125). The type of personal connections with reading that I had appreciated in Roberto's journal would have seemed like a violation of family privacy to Maribel.

Kiyoko was also uncomfortable with keeping a journal for my class but for a different reason. During the interviews, she told me that she had not enjoyed writing in her journal because "even if I didn't have any ideas, I have to write" (148). She often postponed this assignment until all her other homework was completed, and sometimes, she confessed, even did it while watching television (149). I apologized for not recognizing Kiyoko's discomfort and trying to adapt the assignment to better meet her needs, but she reminded me that students are used to this type of uncomfortable situation: "It's usual . . . in school system in Japan" (147). Clearly, both Maribel and Kiyoko saw the journals as "required" and "public," characteristics that caused them a certain amount of discomfort.

In contrast, Lan, a Chinese student who had immigrated to the United States two and a half years earlier, was very enthusiastic about journal writing and felt that it had led to a breakthrough that enabled her finally, on her fourth attempt, to pass the University's test of minimum competence in writing. However, Lan's response to the journal, like Maribel's and Kiyoko's, was influenced by the public nature of a journal that was turned in to a teacher. During the interviews after the semester had ended, Lan explained to me that a few weeks after the course began, she decided to start a second English-

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language journal (“another freewriting book”) just for herself. Surprised to learn of the existence of this second journal, I asked Lan if she would bring in one or two entries so that I could see how this private writing differed from the writing in her class journal. Politely but firmly, she refused. She explained, “I wrote some secrets in that book. That’s why I don’t want to turn it in” (136). Lan said that she actually found this private journal “more helpful” than the one she wrote for the class “because I can write more freely” (144). Perhaps Lan’s understanding of the difference between “public” and “private” writing and her ability to clearly separate the two help to explain why she felt so much more comfortable with journal writing than did her classmates Maribel and Kiyoko.

As any experienced teacher knows, no one technique or writing practice is equally successful for every student. Nevertheless, I am increasingly convinced that, for many students expressive journal writing—whether done on paper or online—can provide an important link in the process of becoming proficient, authoritative writers of academic prose. Writing in 1996, Jim Cody makes a strong case for encouraging basic writing students to use expressive language as a way in to the language of the academy:

Writing workshops enable my students to tell their stories in a discourse that has its roots in a language they can call their own, a language that survives when the entire process of writing is complete. The language that is closest to their own is the language of their thoughts and their intimate conversations with friends and family. Expressive language, therefore, must be encouraged when teaching basic writers if they are to see that writing is a form of communication that has space for their intimate thoughts and ideas to take shape. (109)

Not everyone, however, has been convinced of the arguments Cody presents about the value of personal or expressive writing for basic writers. Deborah Mutnick calls attention to the irony inherent in the fact that notions of self, the “I” of personal writing, are being called into question just as members of marginalized groups are becoming better represented in colleges and universities, as well as in multicultural literature: “... the poststructural critique of the self is ironic for those whose voices have historically not been heard” (84). In her essay validating the use of autobiographical and ethnographic writing for college students, Mutnick argues for grassroots work “giving ordinary people the opportunity to ‘write’ themselves” (81) rather than being defined by others.

Students in composition courses have much to gain from exploring ideas not only in autobiographical or ethnographic forms, as Mutnick suggests, but also in expressive journal writing that precedes the writing of formal academic essays. Despite the caveats expressed here, I am convinced that Britton's concept of expressive language at the center of language (and writing) development remains fundamental—particularly so for basic writers. The chance to write from a deep personal core is especially important for students from previously marginalized groups—women, immigrants, students of color, working-class students. Mutnick explains:

For students on the social margins, the opportunity to articulate a perspective in writing on their own life experiences can be a bridge between their communities and the academy. Such student writing is also a potential source of knowledge about realities that are frequently misrepresented, diluted or altogether absent in mainstream depictions. To an extent, this view of college composition as a cultural repository is true of all students, regardless of social background. But the stories of subaltern students are comparatively scarce. In the context of the explosion of autobiographical writing, the personal narrative as an instructional mode is especially important in that it can give voice to these new nonwriters, making the classroom a more dialogic space and inserting the "I" of ordinary working people and their everyday struggles into public discourse. (84-85)

In this essay Mutnick advocates opening up the types of writing acceptable in college to include student autobiographies and ethnographies. I would add expressive journal writing to the list. Mutnick, however, is not urging a return to the type of "personal" writing advocated by Elbow in the 1990s. Rather, these new forms are rooted in the social; they are "a cultural repository" that becomes part of the "public discourse." The types of writing suggested by Mutnick and the freewheeling engagement with texts and ideas that Roberto practiced in his journal serve to broaden the academic conversation, bringing other voices into the dialogue.

I am not naïve enough, however, to believe that these more personally engaged forms of writing will replace the thesis-driven argumentative essay based on sources—the type of writing espoused by Bartholomae—as the default form of academic writing in U.S. colleges and universities. And students in basic writing courses will continue to need help learning how to

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produce this type of writing. A basic writing course that focuses exclusively on helping students move toward Elbow's mountain—crafting powerful personal narratives using poetic language—will not adequately prepare them for the traditional assignments they will face later on. Nevertheless, I believe that students cannot write a strong and convincing argument unless they have first grappled with their subject in a deeply personal way. This belief is strongly echoed by Frank Cioffi, the author of a recent composition textbook entitled *The Imaginative Argument*. In his preface, Cioffi addresses the students who will use his book as he explains how to write powerful argumentative essays:

You . . . need to imagine what does not at present exist: a response that truly emerges from within yourself, and that would therefore be different as each individual is from every other. And further, if such a process takes place, you will acknowledge and take into account the viewpoints of others. This process, I'm arguing here will advance knowledge as it promotes your own understanding. (Cioffi xi-xii)

This textbook, which is published by Princeton University Press, is not intended for use in basic writing courses. But I would argue that basic writers, even more than students at elite institutions such as Scripps College, where Cioffi teaches, need to connect personally with the ideas they are asked to write about in order to produce “a response that truly emerges from within [themselves].” Some students arrive at college already able to produce convincing—and engaging—prose in the academic mode. I suspect that many of them acquired this ability around the family dinner table or in discussions and writing assignments in challenging high school courses. Most basic writers do not yet have this ability. Roberto’s experience of exploring ideas in expressive language in his reading/writing journal—followed, as it was, by his success in the academic mainstream—suggests one way that teachers of basic writing can help students move closer to this goal.

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Notes

1. Elsewhere, in his many books and articles, Elbow does elaborate on the uses of freewriting or expressive writing, explaining in clear and often memorable language the rationale underlying these practices. Beginning with the groundbreaking *Writing Without Teachers*, originally published in 1973, Elbow's ideas have literally transformed the way writing is taught in the United States—and probably in other countries as well.
2. It seems significant to note that the City University of New York (CUNY) has encouraged teachers and students to focus more on academic reading and writing with the CUNY Proficiency Exam (CPE), which was developed by CUNY faculty after wide consultation and became a requirement for students who entered the University in Fall 1999. All CUNY students take this exam when they've earned between 45 and 60 credits and must pass it in order to graduate from a two- or four-year college in the system. The CPE assesses academic literacy by asking students to read and write critically about two related texts—one of which is distributed in advance. Students' exam essays are expected to: (1) provide a coherent written response appropriately focused on the topic; (2) demonstrate understanding of the readings; (3) use the readings appropriately (and with proper identification of sources) to support their own ideas; and (4) communicate ideas clearly and in accordance with basic linguistic conventions ("CUNY Proficiency Examination"). The abilities needed to pass this exam are obviously those privileged by Bartholomae rather than by Elbow.
3. Bartholomae has done a great deal to improve the teaching of "academic discourse," partly by helping us to see just how difficult and time consuming it is for basic writers to acquire this type of language. He has also helped to promote the importance of reading in composition courses both in his scholarly work and in his widely used textbook, *Ways of Reading*, co-authored with Anthony Petrosky.

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